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ABSTRACT

A review of research on student attrition suggests eight factors influencing students' decisions to remain in a course or in college that may respond to college, counselor, and teacher interventions. First, as low grades are consistently revealed as contributing to attrition, appropriate course placement, basic skills instruction, criterion-based testing and grading, and other techniques that promote student success may foster persistence. Second, poor study habits and skills are also related to attrition, and college staff should disseminate information on effective study methods and memorization skills. Third, the higher the level of students' educational plans, the more likely they are to persist; thus instructors and counselors should help students develop and maintain specific and realistic educational goals. Fourth, student commitment to program completion affects retention, and college staff can help students develop and maintain commitment and motivation. Fifth, sensing that instructors care about their progress fosters students' persistence. Sixth, by contacting students in academic difficulty, teachers and counselors may be able to prevent their dropping out. Seventh, the use of individualized instruction tends to enhance persistence, and finally, an organized program of student support can promote the retention of even high risk students. This paper links retention strategies to key research findings and offers cautions about the strategies' limitations. (KL)

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STUDENT DROPOUT RATES:
SOME KEY FINDINGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS
FOR WHAT TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS CAN DO

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INTRODUCTION: Students are influenced by many things to decide to stay in a course or drop it and to decide to stay in college or drop out. Some of these things lie beyond the control of college faculty, counselors and administrators to influence. But a few of these factors can be influenced by the way college personnel act. The literature on attrition is voluminous and complex by now. Articles mix together all sorts of findings, and they are often not clear on what the action implications are. It seems useful, then, to survey the attrition research from the point of view of the factors that college staff members can control.

Consequently, I have tried to write this brief summary of the attrition research and coping strategies with 4 things in mind:

(1) To find the strongest influences on student attrition and persistence;

(2) To describe those influences which can be controlled somewhat by college staff members' actions and to ignore factors they have little chance of influencing, e.g. a student's high school grades or personal problems;

(3) To describe some ways college instructors and counselors can act to influence persistence and attrition;

(4) To write this in an outline form, easily accessible to college staff members who may not usually have access to the long, complex analyses of attrition in the scholarly literature.

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It should be noted that if faculty members and counselors want to reduce attrition, they have to pay a price for their efforts. The price is partly exacted in the time and energy they expend and partly in the other valuable activities they have to forego. There are also peculiar side-effects like a temptation to lower standards, a desire to readjust course content to favor students in trouble at the expense of able students, a diversion of resources, and a greater emotional stress on staff members who judge themselves by the exacting standard that they must succeed in retaining students.

If individual faculty members and counselors judge the price to be too high, they should stop fighting students' tendency to drop out of their classes. Instead they should accept attrition rates as partly reflecting the way they have decided to teach their classes and as partly reflecting factors that influence the students outside of class. The top priority of most instructors is to teach an honest, competent course which is consistent with the standards set for it by their departments. It is hoped that most faculty will conclude that their efforts to lower attrition are consistent with that goal.

RESEARCH FINDINGSI. Students' Grades

A. Key Finding: If students get low grades, they are more likely to drop out of college than if they get satisfactory grades. (Pantages and Creedon, pp. 64-65; Astin, pp. 14-15; Tinto, p. 104.)

1. This is the strongest and most consistent finding in research on student attrition.

2. This finding is particularly true for first semester and first year grades (Pantages and Creedon, pp. 64-65). If these grades are low, they have a stronger influence on student decisions to drop than do later low grades.

3. If students receive low grades on the first test in a class, it increases their probability of dropping the course (Pantages and Creedon, p. 65.)

4. We may deduce from standard findings on the psychology of expectations: If students expect to get low grades, they are likely to drop. Accordingly, students who get low grades may interpret them as a prediction of future low grades and decide to quit before the trouble gets worse.

B. Applications

1. If teachers can do things that help their students improve their accomplishments in their classes and thereby raise their grades, it will make a direct improvement in retention. Almost anything that teachers do that improves students' ability to honestly succeed in their courses--short of undermining standards and failing to achieve a course's instructional goals--will improve student retention. This help will be especially important for new students.

2. If teachers can help students to expect and to anticipate that they can succeed, more students will persist. It is especially important when students have undergone a "failure experience", however minor, for their instructors and counselors to encourage them to believe they can succeed in the future.

3. Teachers and counselors should attempt to place students in classes that are not too difficult for the students' abilities, if the students will accept such placement.

4. The college should provide classes that effectively teach the basic skills that are prerequisites for success.

5. Teachers should avoid using techniques of teaching and testing that guarantee that some students will fail. For example, they should avoid grading "on the curve" because that method guarantees that a certain percentage of students must get low grades. Instead, they should consider whether it would be

compatible with their teaching goals to use criterion-based testing and grading methods.

II. Study Habits

A. Key Finding: If students have good study habits, they are more likely to persist in college than if they have poor study habits. (Pantages and Creedon, p. 65, four studies cited; Astin, pp. 39-40.)

1. This finding applies to study habits: a student's use of time management, eliminating distractions, attending class regularly, taking notes, etc.

2. This finding also applies to study skills: a student's knowledge of effective memory techniques, skimming and scanning in reading, careful reading of complex passages, finding material that is important, writing coherent test answers and course papers, how to cope with overload, how to cope with anxiety, etc.

B. Applications: If teachers and counselors can help students improve their study habits and study skills, they will end up improving student retention.

1. Colleges should routinely provide a variety of means to disseminate information on effective methods of studying. Possible means are: Effective learning courses, multiple copies of "how to study" books in library and bookstore, free brochures and single-page study tips, accessible audio tapes and video tapes, counselor and faculty training in effective study methods, faculty description of the most effective ways to study various materials in their courses, and so on.

2. Colleges should pay particular attention to students' skills in memorizing. American students are very reluctant to memorize material. Yet there is abundant evidence that when people use the sophisticated techniques that are now available, they can memorize prodigious amounts of material in a reasonable period of time.

III. Students' Plans and Expectations

A. Key Finding: The higher the level of education a student (1) plans to complete and (2) expects to complete, the more likely the student will persist (Tinto, p. 102, ten studies cited.)

B. Application: Some students who have the potential to succeed arrive at college with vaguely felt wishes and desires mixed with fears and doubts. Often they have not formulated careful step-by-step plans to attain their goals. Often they secretly believe they lack the ability to succeed. They covertly expect to fail. Therefore, if faculty members and counselors can assist students in formulating plans and committing themselves to

them, they will increase student retention. Likewise, if they can help students expect ultimate success, they will increase retention.

1. If faculty and counselors encourage students to develop specific plans to follow and provide them with informed help in selecting courses and choosing other steps to follow, they will improve student retention.

2. If faculty and counselors encourage students to believe that it is realistic, desirable and possible to complete a program or to get a degree, it will increase student retention.

3. It should be recognized that students form their own plans and expectations. Other people have limited influence on them. Hence college staff should accept the realistic limits of their influence on students.

4. There are serious ethical problems involved when college staff members try to manipulate students' plans and expectancies. College instructors and counselors should maintain the highest ethical standards when dealing with students' lives.

IV. Students' Commitment

- A. Key Finding: The more committed students are to the goal of completing a program, the more likely they are to persist (Tinto, p. 102, four studies cited).

- B. Applications: If college faculty and counselors can help students develop and maintain a firm commitment to their goals, the students are more likely to persist.

1. If college staff directly ask students to commit themselves to the goal of completing something (a course, a program, etc.), they are more likely to get it and to increase student persistence.

2. College staff can also motivate students to commit themselves to their goals by helping students fully understand the ways in which their completion of a course or a program is rewarding and desirable. Commitment is increased when people perceive that they will get desirable rewards for an action. (For example, a completion can bring a greater skill, a degree or certificate, higher pay, more chances to advance, more interesting work, and person sense of pride at the very fact of having persisted all the way through something difficult.)

3. College staff must accept their limits at influencing students' commitments. These limits are both practical and ethical. One of the profound mysteries of human psychology lies in the process by which people develop commitments to goals that they hang on to and will not let go of. Other people cannot readily influence that process.

4. College staff must accept ethical constraints when they help students formulate commitments to academic goals.

V. Instructors Showing Students They Care About Students' Progress

A. Key Finding: The more that instructors demonstrate to students in many ways that they care about their students' progress, the more likely that students will persist in their courses and in college (Roueche and Snow, pp. 119-121).

1. This finding is not as rigorously proven by statistical research as are the earlier findings. However, many investigators state it, they cite many examples, and the finding is directly consistent with standard research findings in sociology and psychology.

B. Application: Instructors should try to demonstrate to their classes as groups AND to individual students, person by person, that they care about their progress and will help them to succeed.

1. Concerning a class of students as a group: Instructors should directly and indirectly tell their classes that they care and that they will help. They should be responsive and sympathetic to student feedback. They should show in class a warm friendly response to student questions, because the other students will observe the teacher's responses and will thereby grow convinced that the teacher truly cares. Instructors should also do things to make success possible to the students who are able and prepared and honestly trying to succeed. When teachers use effective teaching techniques, communicate their objectives clearly, and test and grade fairly, they also express that they care about the students.

2. Concerning individual students: The literature often mentions that it is effective to learn the students' names and to use them. It also helps to talk personally with as many students as time permits, to remember some information about each one, and to refer to it in conversations with them. The personal touch. One writer stated that memorizing students' names raises retention by 5%.

VI. Personal Contact With Students in Trouble

A. Key Finding: If teachers and counselors personally contact (by phone call or a visit) the students who stop attending class or miss work or get low grades, the students become more likely to persist in class (Roueche and Snow, p. 121; Roueche speeches; personal communication from several instructors at Lane Community College).

1. Although I have not read systematic research studies on this topic, the personal contact technique is strongly supported by anecdotal evidence. It is also directly consistent

with standard research findings in sociological and psychological research.

B. Application: Instructors should keep informed about their students' attendance, punctuality with homework, grades and other indicators of persistence and success. If the instructor spots potential trouble, then he/she or a counselor should personally (a) visit the student at home, or (b) telephone the student at home, or (c) talk to the student after class, or (d) write the student a note.

1. The instructor or counselor should try to accomplish the following things in the talk:

- show concern and care for the student;
- find out the student's situation and problems;
- help meet the student's academic need;
- encourage the student to believe that success is possible (if that is true, of course);
- try to elicit a definite plan and a commitment to the plan from the student.

2. The instructor or counselor may find out that the student is not attending or is dropping because of reasons that should be accepted and not fought--in the judgment of the caller. That should be accepted.

VII. Individualized Instruction Techniques

A. Key Finding: When college faculty use individualized instruction techniques for all or part of a course's material, their students are likely to succeed and to persist (Cross, p. 52-54; Roueche and Snow, pp. 117-118).

1. The basic elements of individualized instruction, according to Cross, are:

- the student must be active;
- there must be clear objectives communicated to the student;
- there should be short lesson units;
- there should be student-controlled self-pacing of the speed of going through the unit;
- the program should give the student frequent feedback and evaluation of her/his accomplishments.

B. Application: Instructors should explore the possibility of converting some or all of their course material into an individualized instruction format.

1. Instructors should be sure to combine their individualized instruction techniques with their personal close contact with students and with openly demonstrated personal concern for the students' progress. When instructors use individualized instruction without keeping close contact with their students, then student attrition rates tend to be as high

or higher than when instructors use conventional methods.

VIII. Organized Programs for Student Support

A. Key Finding: If a college deliberately organizes a program to help students succeed and persist in college, it is likely to succeed, even with "high risk students". Many colleges have tried to do so and the necessary elements in such programs are fairly well known (Roueche and Snow; Roueche, 1978; FIPSE articles on National Project II).

B. Application: Here is a partial list of some elements in good developmental programs. See the above references for further details.

1. The programs target a disproportionate amount of their funds to helping first year students, and in many cases, to helping first semester students.

2. When college staff make decisions about student support and class placement, they regard the students' motivation and persistence as more reliable indicators of success than their high school grades or scores on placement tests. Similarly, they do not regard first-term grades as all that important. Many students are slow starters. Faculty try to communicate these facts to the students in order to encourage them to persist.

3. Many good programs conduct structured, pre-college orientation programs. They range in length from a six-hour session to a six-week session.

4. The programs establish very clear program rules from the outset. They cover attendance, doing homework, making regular contact with the counselor, and the like.

5. The programs provide a positive, supportive environment for students whose previous academic experiences have been negative.

6. The programs use counseling heavily. Counselors keep in close touch.

7. The programs set criteria which require that the student demonstrate she/he possesses the needed academic skills and personal skills to succeed in regular college courses. They state these criteria clearly. They make sure that both developmental instructors and regular college course instructors agree to the criteria.

8. They provide training for teachers to help them better understand the behavior of high-risk students AND to help them develop skills to stop irresponsible behavior of students.

9. They focus as much on student growth and development as upon the development of academic and study skills. They try to help the students develop responsible behavior and beliefs that they can succeed.

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